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Preying on predators is a major mistake

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A wilderness area is more than a place. It is a philosophy. It is a reflection of this nation's respect for its dazzling natural heritage.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 allows untouched places to be set aside for "the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes." That federal law describes wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled" and where undeveloped land is valued for its "primeval character" and "protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions" for future generations.

As the population grows and cities expand, these places are more than just priceless. They are irreplaceable.

A predator is more than just an animal. It is the reason rabbits run and fawns have spots. It animates nature and makes an ecosystem complete. Without predators, a wilderness is a little less of a "community of life," a little lacking in its "primeval character."

That is why the Forest Service should shelve a proposed "rule change" about predators in wilderness areas.

The change would permit aerial shooting, cyanide poisoning and all-terrain vehicle hunts of predators in designated wilderness areas.

Sure, in today's crowded America, top predators can become a threat to humans. Currently, predators deemed dangerous to people or livestock can be pursued in wilderness areas. But it only happens after careful scrutiny by a high-level federal land manager on a case-by-case basis, says Brian Segee, staff attorney for Defenders of Wildlife.

Currently, only specific "problem" animals are targeted. The change the Forest Service is proposing would allow entire populations to be targeted. The decision to kill would no longer be made on a case-by-case basis but under a predator-control plan established by the federal Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, which has a history of eliminating predators for the convenience of ranchers.

"There could literally be monthly flyovers to shoot predators," says Erik Ryberg, staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson. If that sounds farfetched, consider that federal predator-control efforts are the reason wolves were eradicated from many places, including Arizona. The federal government is now trying to re-establish the endangered Mexican gray wolf in the wilds of Arizona and other states.

Don Fischer, national wilderness program leader for the Forest Service, says mass killings wouldn't happen. But they could.

Consider this: The rule change would allow the use of M44 cyanide devices in wilderness areas. Like land mines, these devices are buried. They emit a cloud of lethal sodium cyanide crystals when triggered by an inquisitive predator. Or a dog. Or a child. Or you.

Such devices are indiscriminate and dangerous anywhere. Putting them in areas that were set aside as wilderness is simply ridiculous.

What's more, the proposed rule allows predators in wilderness areas to be killed for "management goals" that include protecting other wildlife. This only makes sense if you are aiming to increase the number of game animals. Such artificial manipulation is not appropriate on wilderness land.

Fischer says his agency will soon begin analyzing the nearly 75,000 public comments received on this rule change. Once that's done, a final decision will be made.

The right decision is clear.

This is not just any rule change. It is a mistake, a big one. It clashes with the spirit of the Wilderness Act, and it should be rejected.